MICHAEL WARD

The Yeti Footprints: Myth and Reality

(*Plates 54–57*)

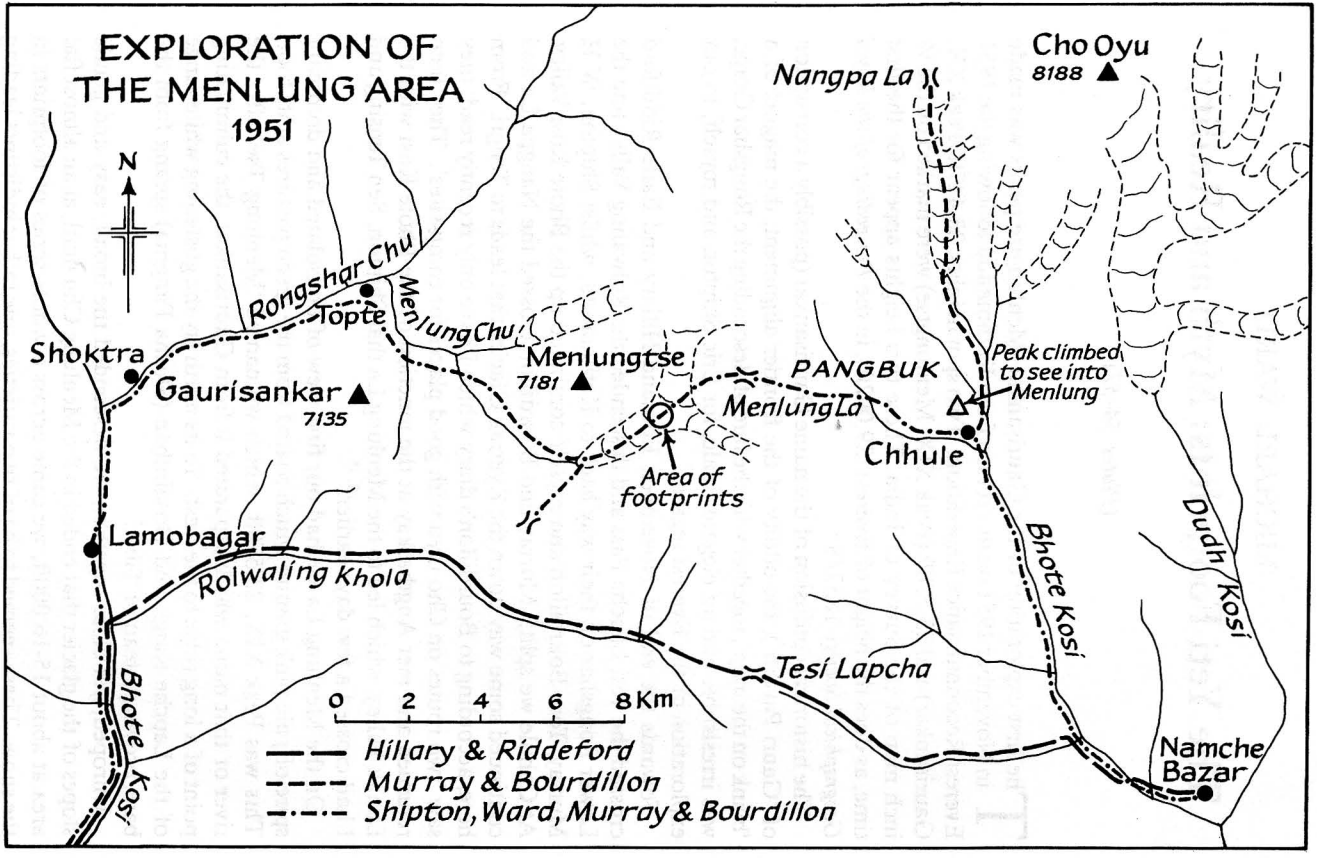
The first exploration of the Gaurisankar–Menlungtse peaks was made in November 1951 on our return from Kathmandu following the 1951 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition. Two spot heights, 23,447ft (Peak XX, Gaurisankar) and 23,570ft (Peak XIX, Menlungtse) were marked on the ¼ inch map of the Survey of India. These two heights appear for the first time, as does the height of Everest (29,002ft), in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* 1857/8.[1]

The historical confusion of the name Gaurisankar (possibly a corruption of 'Gauri Pavarti'), the oddity of the frontier alignment, the magnet of a 'blank on the map', together with the lure of descending the Rongshar Gorge, was irresistible and an elegant finale, for Eric Shipton and myself, to our exploration of the Everest region.

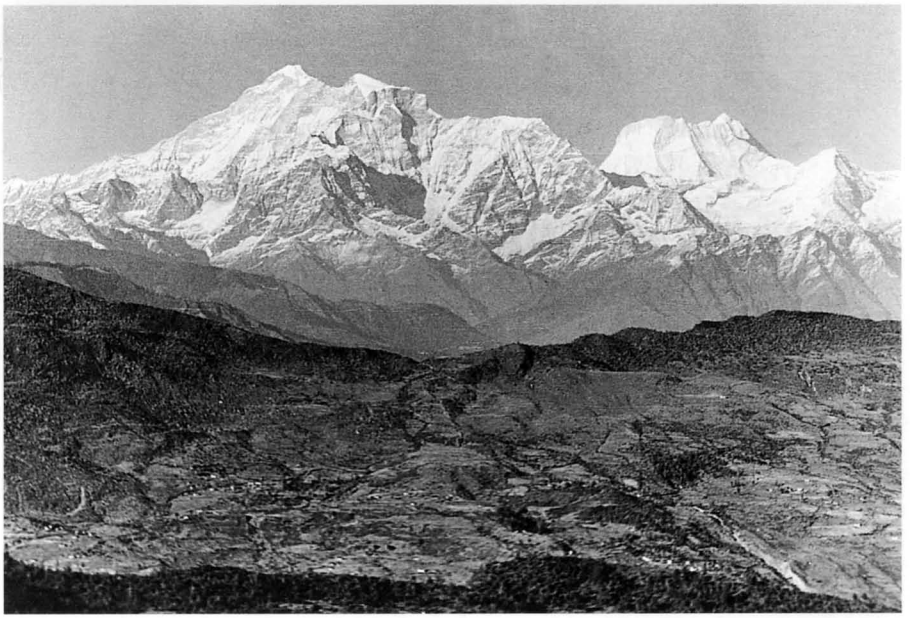
Towards the end of November, Edmund Hillary and Earle Riddiford crossed the Tesi Lapcha Pass and descended the Rolwaling Valley and the Lower Rongshar on their way back to Kathmandu, whilst Shipton, W H Murray, Tom Bourdillon and myself continued up the Bhote Kosi Valley. At Chhule we split; Murray and Bourdillon crossed the Nangpa La and continued some way down the Kyetrak Glacier that leads to Tengri. From here, according to Bourdillon's diary which I have only recently read, they saw 'two routes on Cho Oyu with good places for camp sites'. They then returned and met Angtharkay at the junction of the Bhote Kosi with the Lunak Valley, which led to the Menlung La that Shipton, Sen Tensing and I had crossed a few days earlier.[2, 15]

On the Menlung La we had our first view of an isolated and dominant spire of pale pink granite which soared from the green pastures at its foot. This was Peak XIX, 23,570ft, which we named 'Menlung Tse' after the river of that name which separated it from Gaurisankar, the culminating point of a long ridge to the west. To its north lay the glistening white range of the Lapche Kang; and Gosainthan (Shisha Pangma) sprang from the bare, brown plateau of Tibet.

Unroped, yet close together, we descended the broad, easy and gentle slopes of the glacier that ended in the Menlung Chu until, at an almost flat area at about 15-16,000ft, we came across a whole series of footprints in the snow. These seemed to be of two varieties, one rather indistinct leading to the surrounding snowfields, while the other had in places a markedly


EXPLORATION OF
THE MENLUNG AREA
1951
N
Rongshar Chu
Topte
Menlung Chu
Shoktra
Gaurisankar
7135
Menlungtse
7181
PANGBUK
Menlung La
Area of
footprints
Nangpa La
Cho Oyu
8188
Peak climbed
to see into
Menlung
Chhule
Lamobagar
Rolwaling Khola
Bhote Kosi
Tesi Lapcha
Bhote Kosi
Dudh Kosi
Namche
Bazar
0 2 4 6 8 Km
Hillary & Riddeford
Murray & Bourdillon
Shipton, Ward, Murray & Bourdillon

54. Yeti footprint and ice axe: a photograph taken during the Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition 1951. (*Michael Ward*) (p81)



55. Gaurisankar and Menlungtse seen from the Chyubas Ridge, 1951. (*Michael Ward*) (p81)

individual imprint etched in the two to four-inch snow covering on the top of hard névé. We had no means of measuring these, so Shipton took four photographs, two of the indistinct prints with myself, my footprints and rucksack as comparison; the other two photos were of one of the most distinct and detailed prints, one with my ice axe and one with my booted foot for scale. This footprint was about the same length as my boot, a continental size 42 (8½ British), which is about 12-13 inches long. The print was nearly twice as broad as my boot and had clear edges. There was the definite imprint of a big toe, broader and sharper than the other rather indistinct toes of which there seemed to be four or five.

We followed the tracks some way down the easy glacier and noted that whenever a narrow, six inch-wide crevasse was crossed there seemed to be 'claw' marks in the snow. Finally we left the glacier and the line of footprints to get onto a grassy lateral moraine. We followed this for some time, passing a number of wild goats, until we found a suitable camp site.

A few days later, we were joined by Murray and Bourdillon who had followed us over the Menlung La. In his diary Bourdillon comments on the tracks which, by the time he saw them, had become deformed by sun and wind, and they followed them for some way down the Menlung Glacier.

Over the next few days we explored the Menlung Basin, which Shipton compared to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, climbed to the east ridge of Gaurisankar and looked down into the Rolwaling Valley. Finally we followed the Menlung Chu down to the Rongshar Valley, disturbing some Tibetans on the way who fled before us as if we had been ghosts. In the Rongshar, which we descended after nightfall, we passed a sizeable village, Topte, and just before the Nepal border a minute hamlet, Shoktra. Here we were 'captured' by Tibetan levies, but Angtharkay managed to negotiate our release for about Rs5 (then worth about 7s 6d).

We had of course asked Sen Tensing about the footprints. A native of Khumbu, he had travelled all over the Himalaya and Karakoram and had no doubt at all that the footprints belonged to the yeti, of which there were two types, he said, the yak-eating and man-eating, the latter leaving smaller tracks. He described the yeti as walking on two legs, standing about five feet high and covered with brown hair. It had a face like a man, with a high forehead. When pressed, he confessed that he himself had never seen a yeti. We spoke to him in Urdu, but when we reached Kathmandu he was questioned again in his own Sherpa language and he told exactly the same story.

The discovery of these footprints in 1951 stimulated great interest in the yeti and, as a result, many expeditions of greatly varying degrees of competence have taken place in the Himalaya and Central Asia.[3, 4, 5, 6] None has been successful in that no skeleton, carcass, bones, hide or faeces of a yeti have been found. As a result, it has been suggested that the tracks found by Shipton and myself may have been a hoax. Some 'investigators' have even considered that Shipton's account, written in 1951, was

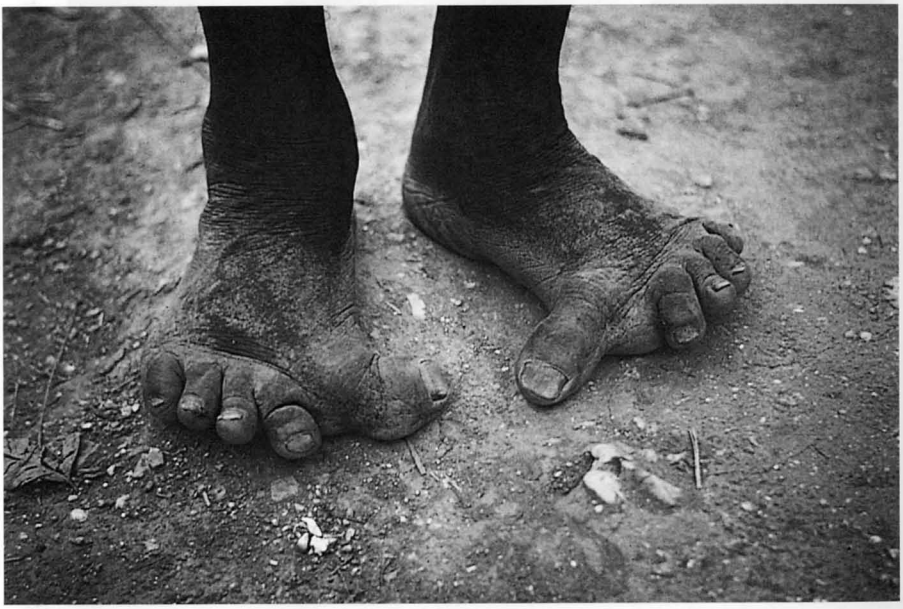
Abominable!

Right

56. A Bhutanese highlander, born and bred in Lunana, walking in snow in bare feet in 1965. He would have regarded wearing shoes or boots as a form of 'dressing up'. (*Michael Ward*) (p81)

Below

57. The deformed foot of a Nepalese highlander showing both big toes twisted. (*Michael Ward*) (p81)



deliberately concocted because he was bitter at being deprived of the leadership of the 1953 expedition.[7] That theory ignores the fact that his description of the prints was written at least a year prior to this event, and that, as a medical scientist accustomed every day to accurately describing and analysing clinical abnormalities, I also saw the tracks, and that Bourdillon, another scientist, confirmed their existence, though much deformed, a few days later. This was no hoax and the events occurred exactly and precisely as described in Shipton's book on the Everest Reconnaissance and by myself in this article. There must, therefore, be some rational explanation.

Over the years there have been many descriptions of unusual footprints found in the snow on remote snowfields, glaciers and passes of the Himalaya and Central Asia. Yak, wild goat, snow leopards, fox, wolves have all been seen up to heights of at least 21,000ft.[8] A bear or langur monkey are other possibilities but no evidence of tail marks were seen. At these heights there is little or no food, but animals do travel long distances over snowfields; in the winter of 1960-61 I saw, from a distance, a four-legged animal, either a fox or a wolf, cross from the Hongu into the Mingbo Valley. The yeti story seems to have started with the description of one in Sikkim by N A Tombazi in 1925. However, objective and confirmed evidence of their existence has so far proved nonexistent.[9]

Most of the prints have been seen by mountaineers, the majority of whom are laymen, and the explanations have been provided by anthropologists and others who have assumed that the prints were made by normal feet. None has ever considered that the Menlung prints or others could have been made by a local Tibetan with abnormally-shaped feet. In a primitive community, many days and miles from even the most basic medical facilities and quite beyond the reach of surgery, abnormality of the foot would remain from birth onwards. Even in 'civilised' communities abnormally-shaped feet are not uncommon, and many do not prevent walking.

Increase in the size of part of the foot is a well recognised phenomenon, and the toes may be reduplicated, with up to ten toes on each foot. Some toes, too, are fused together, giving a larger than normal digit.[10] In Nepal I have seen a deformity of the big toe on each foot whereby each was at right angles to the rest of the foot. Though the man could walk and carry a load perfectly well, he could not wear boots or any foot covering and left a bizarre imprint on the snow. 'Club foot' produces many extraordinary abnorm-alities. In 'lobster foot', for instance, the foot has only two immense toes. In another instance, the whole foot and lower leg are twisted so much that the heel points forward. Tilman rejected such a possibility, but it can occur.[11] Long-standing, untreated infections of the nerves, bone and skin can deform the feet in a grotesque manner. A further possibility is that one footprint was superimposed upon another.[12]

Allowing for abnormally-shaped feet, is it possible for Himalayan inhabitants to walk in the snow barefoot for long periods without

frostbite? The answer is 'yes'. I have seen families in the Bhutan Himal do this, and scientific investigations have been completed of two instances in the Himalaya. The first took place during the Silver Hut Expedition in 1960-61, which wintered at 19,000ft in the Everest region. During that winter we had a visit from Man Bahadur, a Nepalese pilgrim aged 35 years, who normally lived at 6000ft. He stayed for 14 days at 15,300ft and above, and throughout this period wore neither shoes nor gloves, and walked in the snow and on rocks in bare feet without any evidence of frostbite. He wore minimal clothing and had no sleeping bag or protective equipment other than a woollen coat. He was continuously monitored whilst spending four days without shelter between 16,500ft and 17,500ft, with night temperatures between –13°C and –15°C, and day temperatures below freezing. Eventually he developed deep cracks in the skin of his toes, which became infected, and he returned to lower levels for this reason. Had any European members of the party followed this regime they would undoubtedly have become severely frostbitten and hypothermic.[13]

The second case occurred some years later, when an investigation of Buddhist practitioners of G-Tum-Mo yoga confirmed that it was possible to 'warm without fire' under experimental conditions, and they raised the temperature of their hands and feet by as much as 8.3°C.[14]

Some degree of cold tolerance at the periphery does occur in those who spend long periods in low temperatures without protection. This is probably due to the modification of a condition known as 'cold-induced vasodilatation', in which the peripheral blood vessels dilate in cycles on exposure to cold, allowing warm blood to reach these parts, rather than constrict and prevent it. Obviously the pilgrims and yoga practitioners were able to control this response and also maintain continuous light shivering, rather than the intermittent violent shivering that is normal, to keep their central core temperature above hypothermia levels.

Finally, the 'claw marks' observed on the Menlung La could be explained by the presence of a well-known surgical condition *onycho griffosis* ('ram's horn nail'). Commoner in the big toe, the nail becomes deformed and greatly thickened, curving round to pierce the skin on the under-surfaces of the affected toe; alternatively, the nail sticks out for up to an inch, exactly like a claw. This condition is caused by recurrent untreated infections combined with repeated minor trauma in unhygienic conditions. Adequate treatment involves surgical removal, which is not likely to be available in remote Himalayan valleys.[10]

Although we saw no yaks in the Menlung basin, it was obviously visited regularly by local inhabitants from the villages in the Rongshar gorge only a few miles away, for we disturbed a villager on our descent and a path ran by the side of the Menlung Chu to the basin.

We will never know for certain what man or animal made the footprints in the Menlung basin in 1951, but I think that the above possible explanations are as plausible as any that have been put forward so far.

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